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# Social Theory & Its Relation to Social Problems: An Essay about Theory and Research with Social Justice in Mind

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*This essay examines the relationship between social theory and social problems, the truth-value of theories, and the importance of theorizing about the role of the state, i.e., national government, in the resolution of social problems and the achievement of social justice. The author argues that much contemporary social theory has lost its moorings in regard to amelioration of social problems, that Popper's criterion of falsification is a requisite for more meaningfully applied social theory, and that the state should be part of any social theory meant to address social problems. Moral and political philosophy is used to provide criteria to justify a positive role for government to develop and implement policies to achieve a more justice society than would be the case if market mechanisms were deemed the most appropriate arbiter of economic and social exchange. The author concludes with examples of his own theoretically driven and empirically grounded research on social justice to tie together the elaborated themes of social theory, falsification, and retaining the state as an object of theoretical inquiry when addressing social problems.*

**Keywords:** *social theory, role of the state, social problems, social justice*

This essay covers three broad topics: the relationship between social theory and social problems, the truth-value of theories, and the importance of theorizing about the role of the state, i.e., national government, in the achievement of social

justice. First, much contemporary social theory has interest in ameliorating of social problems, a goal of classical social theorists. Second, many social theorists tend to fall into two camps, those who are more concerned that their theories be correct (have truth value) and those who want their theories to be useful. Each camp, however, fails to see that truthfulness and utility are important to theoretical developments meant to have any viability in regard to amelioration of social problems and realization of social justice. Third, without the legitimate, tangible incentives and moral exhortations inherent in policies issued by national governments, these goals cannot be achieved. The contemporary global economy requires national level leadership.

This essay draws on Mouzelis (1995) and Unger (1987/2004a&c. Also see 1975), whose "old fashion theory books" apply a set of critical arguments on conceptual themes (Cohen, 1996). It also relies on Popper (1961, 1965, & 1968) whose efforts to demarcate scientific theories/knowledge from other bases or claims of theoretical knowledge (e.g., ideology, religion, law, logic) provide a useful criterion by which to judge the capacity of social theories to adjudicate truth claims (Also see Baert, 2005; Magee, 1985). Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol (1985) and others (e.g. Barry, 2004; Peters, 2004) provide theoretical insights into the importance of the state in safeguarding against the erosion of the public sphere, promoting protections against the vicissitudes of the market, and providing the institutional structure within which contested aspects of social justice can be settled. Finally, this essay illustrates how normative or emancipative social justice theories, types of which Popper would reject on principle because they are not scientific, can nonetheless provide a basis for empirical investigation for purposes of knowledge building in a way that Popper would in all likelihood approve. To do this, the author relies on examples of his own conceptual and empirical works (Caputo, 2005a & b; 2004; 2003a & b; 2002a & b) that can be used in support of arguments justifying a positive role for national government in the amelioration of social problems and the achievement of social justice.

It should be clear from the outset that this essay will be silent in regard to theory development for its own sake, a

position advocated by Kiser and Hechter (1991; Also see Hage, 1994; Jasso, 2001). Somers (1998) criticized Kiser and Hechter's "theoretical realism" (the thesis that belief in an explanation depends on belief in the *a priori* theory from which it is imputed) and posited "relational realism" which places greater emphasis on the pragmatic aspects of explanation (Also see Skocpol, 1994; Quadagno & Knapp, 1992). Somers's position is adopted in this paper. The author contends that amelioration of social problems and the realization of social justice are better served when theories are developed with problem resolution and social betterment in mind rather than as a byproduct or epiphenomenon of formal theory development.

### *Types and uses of theory*

Any classification of types and uses of theory is inherently arbitrary and suspect, perhaps at best reflecting latent if not overt biases of whoever constructs such a scheme and at worst leading to epistemological paralysis if pressed for logical consistency and coherency. Nonetheless, for analytical purposes classification schemes are necessary to get the present discussion going with some degree of clarity so that contestation when warranted can move forward rather than end in a stalemate. Wagner (1963), albeit "dated" but nonetheless useful as a backdrop to the subsequent discussion of how contemporary social theorists lost their moorings, identifies three main types of social theories that still have relevance: positive, interpretive, and evaluative. Positive social theories are those whose authors consider themselves and treat their theories within the tradition of the natural sciences. For analytical purposes, these include neo-positivists (e.g., Lundberg, 1955), human ecologists (e.g., Duncan, Schnore, & Rossi, 1959), structural functionalists (e.g., Merton, 1968), social behaviorists (e.g., Homans, 1958, 1987), and bio-psychologists (e.g., Linton, 1940).

Interpretive social theories are those whose authors adhere to the general methodological rules of science, but in contradistinction to the natural sciences. These social theorists adhere to the Weberian conception of "value-free" science, while the "value-relevant" nature of the human subject matter nonetheless relies on a methodology of social inquiry that is *sui generis*. Interpretive social theories include cultural understanding

(e.g., Riesman, 1950), action and interaction (e.g., Becker, 1953), social psychology or symbolic interaction (e.g., Goffman, 1956), and social phenomenology (e.g., Schutz, 1970).

Evaluative social theories are those whose authors neither consider nor treat their theories within the realms of positive or interpretative science. Rejecting both positive "objectivity" and interpretive "value-neutrality," evaluative social theorists proceed on the basis of their philosophical premises, ideological convictions, and value systems. Systematic philosophical expositions, coherent ideological orientations, sets of social ideals, or systems of moral principles form the basis of such theories. Evaluative social theories include social philosophical (e.g., Wolff, 1959), ideological social (e.g., Lynd, 1939), and humanitarian reform (e.g., Thompson, 1961). Given these three strands, whatever convergences in social theory that occurred in earlier times are now gone (Giddens & Turner, 1987; Lundberg, 1956).

### Modern social theory – what is wrong with it?

*Mouzelis.* To the extent Mouzels (1995) is correct, social theorists went wrong when they failed to go beyond Parson's (1951) adaptation (A), goal-attainment (G), integration (I), and latency or pattern-maintenance/tension management (L) scheme (AGIL) for the analysis of social systems and instead got bogged down in theories of rational choice (e.g., Becker, 1991), structuration (e.g., Giddens, 1984), figuration (e.g., Bourdieu, 1989), and the like (Cohen, 1996). He seeks to preserve objectivity, associated with positivist social theory characteristic of the Durkheimian-Parsonian functionalist tradition, and value-neutrality, associated with Weberian interpretive social theory tradition. Mouzels argues against the over determinism of the former and the neglect of hierarchical, institutional structures in the latter. He also argues against philosophical and ideological approaches to social theory that weaken ties between theory and empirical research. Such theories (e.g., Baudrillard, 1981) collapse the boundaries between and within intellectual disciplines, boundaries that are requisite for theoretical development.

Mouzels (1995) argued that Parsonian theory, while

providing a conceptual framework for the study of cultural, social, and personality systems, overemphasized "systemness" or determinacy at the expense of agency on both the macro and micro levels of analysis. Micro-level rational choice theorists got it wrong by exclusively focusing on an inadequate if not incorrect conceptualization of individual decision making and by omitting any consideration of the context within which preferences are formed and decisions made. Interpretative theorists got it wrong by identifying action/interaction, or symbolic interaction, with micro-level analysis and institutional structures with macro-level analysis and by systematically neglecting social hierarchies they failed to link the two. Transcendent social theorists, that is, those who attempted to transcend the micro-macro dichotomy (e.g., Bourdieu, 1989) nonetheless retained the functionalist logic inherent in Parsonian theory. That logic incorrectly applied AGIL systemic attributes appropriate for collectivities as wholes to subsystems that do not necessarily refer to any specific sub-collectivity with its own clearly defined goals and decision-mechanisms. As such, Bourdieu's "habitus" for example, downplayed the voluntary, interaction-situational dimension of human agency and thereby retained functionalism's deterministic character.

Mouzelis (1995) posits that the road ahead for social theory resides with linking micro with macro and action with institutional structure in a way that facilitates empirical research on the constitution, reproduction, and transformation of social systems. The detailed particulars of his nascent scheme for doing so go beyond the scope of this essay. Briefly, Mouzelis retains the Parsonian AGIL logic of systemic wholes, but recommends viewing all institutional spheres (economic, political, legal, educational / familial / religious) in terms of technologies, modes of appropriation / control, and ways in which such controls are legitimated. This view would provide the appropriate tools for showing how institutional incompatibilities lead, or fail to lead, to group conflicts on the economic (A), political (G), legal (I), and cultural (L) level. In addition it would allow "who" questions about the constitution, reproduction, and transformation of social wholes.

*Unger.* Unger (1987/2004c) exhorts us to resuscitate and retain the explanatory ambitions and emancipating potentials

of classical social theory (Lie, 1996). "A politicized social theory can coexist with natural science" Unger proclaims, "without either imitating its methods or claiming an unjustified exemption from the responsibilities of causal analysis" (p. 170). Social explanations incorporate causality but they do so in an "anti-necessitarian" fashion, eschewing "false necessity" by encompassing contingency and thereby allowing for possibility (Unger, 1987/2004a). The particulars of Unger's prescriptions for transformative institutional experimentation have been sufficiently criticized elsewhere (e.g., Shapiro, 1989. See Unger, 1987/2004b) and they need not concern us here. More to the point of this essay is Unger's concern for the place and role of social theory in our efforts to ameliorate social problems and achieve social justice.

Unger (1987/2004c, pp. 80-169) argues that "deep structure" and "deep logic" theories such as those in the Marxist and neoclassical economic traditions have failed on their own terms because there is no teleological sequence or underlying basic logic of the kind they posited (Shapiro, 1989). Positivist science falls short in Unger's view in part because its underlying assumptions about cumulative knowledge building have turned out to be unwarranted (Dahrendorf, 1997; Turner, 1994). Positivist science also falls short in part because of its "refusal to take the distinction between the formative context and the formed-routines, or between structure-preserving and structure-transforming conflict, as central to the practice of social and historical explanation" (Unger, 1987/2004c, p. 130). Deconstructionists in the Foucaultian tradition also fall short. Such theorists fail to construct, that is, as it subjects a current state of affairs to seemingly endless critical inquiry, deconstructionists fail to make a positive case for a desirable alternative that can withstand their own scrutiny.

As an alternative, Unger (1987/2004c) advances "super theory," that is, a set of social theory practices that informs general explanatory theories with historical particularities. Such a "super-theory" approach to constructing social theories, while empirically grounded in historical particulars, would "explore the interplay between the attractions of empowerment through the invention of less imprisoning social contexts and the countervailing forces that prod us into the prison"

(p. 198). The goal of this explanatory super-theory would be to "identify a formative set of institutional arrangements and of enacted beliefs about the possible and desirable forms of human action" to show how these "compulsive routines" are politically constructed and how they limit transformative political action (Shapiro, 1989, p. 478).

Mouzelis (1995) would take Unger (1987/2004a&c) to task for downplaying the vital role more limited or middle range theories can play in regard to improving the usefulness of social theory for purposes of problem solving. Nonetheless, both theorists retain agency as an essential component in social theory. Retaining agency precludes the over determination characteristic of contemporary social theorists such as Giddens (1984) and Bourdieu (1989). Concomitantly, both theorists retain the link between theoretically driven empirically based research and social transformation, while retaining the prospect of emancipation from unjust conditions. As such, their work is consistent with that of Albert, Cagan, Chomsky, Hahnel, King, Sargern, and Sklar (1986, p. 111) who have also explicitly linked social theory as a component of scientific inquiry to social theory as an instrument of social transformation. Their agendas for the development of social theory are consistent with Popper's criterion for good scientific theory, namely generating hypothetical statements that can be falsified, which, as Kumar (1995) acknowledges, many of the post-industrial and post-modernist theories do not satisfy (e.g., Baudrillard, 1987).

### Popper and the Truth-Value of Theories

Karl Popper set out a model of natural science in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959/1968) and he extended it to the social sciences in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1943/1966) and *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957/1961). Popper maintained that no scientific theory could ever be conclusively proved or declared true. The best we could do is to make predictions repeatedly and attempt to refute or falsify them. Social theories for Popper were regulative ideals or logical fictions constructed for purposes of deducing predictions that could be tested, or shown to be correct or incorrect. Popper saw no fundamental divide between natural or social science in the sense that



scientific truth claims were in principle hypothetical and potentially falsifiable. The test of falsification aided in the adjudication of competing scientific truth claims. Popper drew a divide, however, between science and metaphysics. The latter's truth claims were constructed in such a way they were not amendable to falsification, that is, to testing empirically. The test of falsification would be inappropriate to adjudicate truth claims across the scientific non-scientific divide.

Popper's anti-foundational approach to science defied the relativism associated with post-modernist theorists' denial of the validity of making truth claims (Baert, 2005; Kuhn (1962/1970). Unlike poststructuralists and pragmatists, Popper maintained that we could approach truth from experience. In this regard, he echoed the views of logical positivists who also believed that the only legitimate knowledge was that derived from experience (Edge, 2001). Popper objected to the logical positivists' view of science based primarily on verification and posited instead that truth could be approached primarily from errors.

In Popper's view scientific methods entailed the creative production of hypotheses that could lead to predictions that in turn could be verified or refuted by experience, with the potential for refutation or falsification as the more significant attribute of the two for scientific advancement. Hence, Popper regarded any discipline that did not lead to empirically testable predictions, such as Marxism or psychoanalysis, as a pseudoscience (Chessick, 2001). Instead, much like Unger (1987/2004a&c), Popper's contention that truth per se is best stated hypothetically and treated provisionally (that is, subject to testing empirically or to falsification) encourages a readiness to make bold assertions or conjectures in regard to how things are or are likely to be and the honesty to recognize and wherewithal to acknowledge when they are shown to be incorrect. That such conjectures can be shown to be incorrect Popper does not doubt, thereby removing him from the camp of post-modernists for whom truth is better abandoned as an object of inquiry (Anonymous, 1992) and who view theory less as a pragmatic test shot at empirical targets and more as a vital component of creating the object under study as well as their explanation (Alexander, 1988).

Popper's falsification criterion has been critiqued, correctly in my opinion, for insufficiently specifying what counts as falsifying criteria. The charge that failing the test of falsification in which a *single* counter-observation can falsify a theory (Somers, 1998) is, in my view, an overstatement and it may reflect a misunderstanding of his work (Magee, 1985, p. 19). Much depends on what a theory purports to explain and how adequately a crucial test is designed and implemented. A *single* counter-observation of a hypothesis need not result in rejection of a theory per se, especially in the absence of a competing theory that could be subjected to empirical test or even with the availability of an alternative theory that does not allow for such a test. Further, as Munro (2002) notes, if it is logically possible that an observation statement can be wrong, it is also logically possible that the theory, although apparently falsified by it, might nonetheless be true.

Popper's insistence on the importance of empirically-based methods as grounds for scientific truth claims and theoretical development should by no means be construed to imply that such methods were the only valid forms of inquiry for purposes of obtaining important insights into human development. Disciplines such as moral psychology and political philosophy, which benefit from logical argumentation, provide sufficient evidence that such is not the case (Indick, 2002). Nor should falsification be construed as the only criterion that theories must meet to be considered scientific, as Baert (2005, p. 82) contends. Coherency, logical consistency, and parsimony are also important. Nor should theory only provide researchers with statements that can be tested. Theoretical progress also consists in generating better researchable questions (Quadagno & Knapp, 1992).

The insistence in this essay is only to place ourselves as social scientists in the position such that our theoretical assertions about causal relationships have the potentiality of being shown to be wrong. In addition, we should admit as much when someone does so. Our ability to act accordingly is crucial in regard to truth claims about the efficacy of intervention strategies, whether designed by government to meet public purposes or by practitioners such as social workers to improve the social functioning of clients (Munro, 2002; Also

see Gomory, 2002a & b; Thyer, 2001a & b).

*Bringing the state back in*

The proper role of the state in the society in general and in the economy in particular continues to be one of ambivalence, if not contestation (Bernstein, 2001; Caputo, 1994; Wier & Skocpol, 1985). The increasing influence of international governing bodies and transnational corporations challenges the relevance of national governments and nation-states (Kentor, 2005; Strange, 1996). Evans (1995) notes that international bodies have a dampening effect on the expansion of the state's role in the economy in countries that become major capital exporters, especially centers of international finance capital. These dampening effects should by no means be construed as a cessation of state influence or importance as an actor in global affairs. As Evans also notes, national governments are vitally important to expanding economies and international relations in developing countries. Caputo (2000) contends that the role of the state is vital for purposes of social justice to securing basic human rights for all citizens and, under specified laws, for non-citizens within nations. In addition, the state plays an important role in regard to poverty reduction, particularly in regard to the legitimate or just redistribution of wealth within as well as among countries (Caputo, 2005).

No one overarching theory of the state emerges from the plethora of historical and comparative studies of the state in the post-World War II period. The development of middle-range theories about state autonomy and capacity as a society-shaping and global-influencing institutional structure remain an elusive but nonetheless worthy goal (Evans, Rueschemeyer, & Skocpol, 1985; Jessop, 1990). How to achieve the right balance of prosperity, civility and liberty is no easy matter, but the role of the state remains crucial (Dahrendorf, 1997; Leadbeater, 2004). The need remains for state-related social theory amenable to falsification. The theoretical tasks at hand are to identify under what circumstances which components of the state can foster conditions for people to create public goods and to specify the causal links between government action and social benefits. Such links in turn can then be subject to empirical scrutiny. The empirical task is to check out whether the causal

links do what the theories purport and if not to suggest modifications that can also be subject to empirical scrutiny.

### Conclusion: Tying Together Theory, Falsification, and Normative Aspects of Social Justice

This essay concludes with examples of my own work that tie together theory, falsification, and normative aspects of social justice in regard to two social problems: health disparities and work-related discrimination. Caputo (2003) addresses health disparities; Caputo (2002) addresses work-related discrimination. Both studies rely on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the 1979 cohort.

Before proceeding to my own work, however, it should be noted that I avoid "totalizing" social theories such as those of Parsons (1951) and Wallerstein (1974) which are primarily descriptive and leave little room for falsification (Kumar, 1995). I also take issue in part with political philosophers such as Berlin (1969, 1997) who limit the appropriate role of the state primarily to fostering "negative" liberty, as important as such related freedoms no doubt are (Also see Gray, 1996). Instead, relying on moral and political philosophers such as Rawls (2001, 1971), Barry (2005), and Nathanson (1998), I delineate criteria which if met can be used to justify a positive role for government to develop and implement policies with distributional effects aimed to achieve a more justice society than would be the case if market mechanisms were deemed the most appropriate arbiter of economic and social exchange. In doing so, my work is consistent with those whose social theory takes the form of moral or social philosophy (For a select review of such theorists see Holmwood, 2000; Rossides, 1998, pp. 295-297; for a direct application, see Plant, Lesser, & Taylor-Gooby, 1980; for a classic treatment on related themes, see Polanyi, 1944/2001). For a more general treatment applying normative criteria to assess the merits of policy-related programs whose outcomes are amendable to empirical testing see Caputo (1989). As such, my work falls within the evaluative strand of social theory as developed by Wagner (1963).

Caputo (2003) found that socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity were robust predictors of physical health and they

provided support for expanding Rawls's index of social goods to include social determinants of health. The theoretical issues boiled down to whether it would ever be reasonable and rational to accept a tradeoff in which some health inequality was (1) allowed in order to produce some non-health benefits for those with the worst health prospects or (2) reduced in order to produce health benefits for those with the worst health prospects. Justifiable grounds were examined for absolute gains in overall health even if some were made worse off (but not too seriously) and for relative health statuses in which resources would be redistributed to those worst off either at the expense of those better off (again, not to a serious or life-threatening extent) or with no overall gain in health. The purpose of the study was to determine under what conditions appeals for social justice might be warranted for absolute gains in health and for relative health statuses.

Falsifying conditions that would determine the merits of social justice arguments for government action to reduce health disparities included, for examples whether Blacks were found to be worse off than Whites or whether women fared worse than men in regard to measures of physical and mental health when controlling for a variety of hereditary, background, life-style, and other cumulative and structural factors over the life cycle. The finding that White and Black females fell below White males on the measure of mental health lent support to advocates of social justice who claim that the relative status of groups can form the basis of legitimate governmental and social interventions on their behalf. On the other hand, the finding that Black males were *less* likely than White males to fall below the typical U.S. person on the measure of physical health used in the study challenged blanket appeals for race-related interventions for redistribution of resources based on appeals to social justice. The implication was that absolute (i.e., aggregate) gains in physical health could be pursued even if Black males were not the beneficiaries or had no net gains.

The intent here is to present, not defend, these findings and their implications. Limitations of the study, such as the participation only of non-institutionalized persons in the NLSY79 sample and the infant/childhood mortality rates of Black males, can be found in the article (Caputo, 2003). For purposes

of this essay, the merit of the theoretically driven and normative based study is that it was done in such a way that findings are subject to falsification from further scrutiny and policy prescriptions are made with caution in mind since they would need to be modified accordingly if findings were shown to be incorrect.

Caputo (2002) examined work-related discrimination. This study pitted two social justice theories against one another: the classical utilitarian tradition of maximizing the greatest good vs. the liberal utilitarian tradition of maximizing good without worsening the situation of the most disadvantaged persons. On-going debates about affirmative action often pit justice claims of Blacks and women for preferential treatment on liberal utilitarian grounds against those of white males for merit-based decisions on classical utilitarian grounds. In the study, young labor force participants reporting discrimination in their efforts to get good jobs were found to obtain more additional education and job training than those who reported no such discrimination over the same time periods. Findings suggested net aggregate gains as well as gains by historically work-related discriminated groups (namely Blacks and women in this study) and as such challenged blanket social justice appeals for race- and gender-related interventions for redistribution of resources. Findings imply that social justice advocates would be on firmer footing to the extent they advance public policies ensuring access to education and training in the broadest possible sense affirming opportunity for all rather than specific disadvantaged groups.

As with Caputo (2003), the intent here is to present, not defend, these findings and their implications. The peer review process of the manuscript made clear that the findings are controversial. In the final analysis, they were deemed to warrant both further discussion (hence, the decision to publish) and scrutiny.

In conclusion, the merits of Caputo (2003) and Caputo (2002) are that 1) they are theoretically driven; 2) normatively based; 3) done in such a way that findings are subject to falsification; and 4) suggest appropriate state action in light of findings and limitations. These two studies are among several others of mine that to different degrees tie together theory,

falsification, and normative aspects of social justice in regard to social problems (e.g., see Caputo, 2004). What links much of my empirical work is that the studies are premised on the prospect of using normative criteria as a basis for deciding appropriate calls for state action to remedy social problems. Each is guided by social theory taking the form of moral or social philosophy for purposes of making an evaluation and each met Popper's falsification criterion. Related hypotheses are constructed such that they could be shown to be met or not and the social justice arguments that identified a potential area of state intervention either held firm or fell accordingly. If social theory is not to wither or not to remain primarily an academic exercise which may address social problems in an epiphenomenal way rather than head on, then theoreticians should use Popper's criterion as one of the main considerations when constructing theories, have a specific social problem in mind, and specify normative criteria upon which to judge whether study findings warrant state action to achieve social justice.

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